

# FENTANYL: THE FACTS

## WHAT IS FENTANYL?

Fentanyl is a very strong narcotic pain medication that is prescribed for severe, disabling pain and pain after surgery. Fentanyl acts on the brain and central nervous system like other opioids such as morphine and heroin.

Fentanyl is about 100 times stronger than morphine and there is a small margin between the therapeutic dose and toxic dose. Therefore it is very easy to overdose on this drug.

Fentanyl acts very quickly inside the body and this fast action can cause you to stop breathing much quicker than other drugs and therefore has a much greater chance of overdose.

Some slang names for fentanyl are china girl, china white, dance fever, goodfella, murder 8, TNT and tango and cash.

### HOW IS FENTANYL USED?

Prescribed fentanyl can be administered in many ways. In Australia, the most common form of fentanyl is prescribed as a patch which is applied to the skin. Other forms of fentanyl include lozenges and injections.

## FENTANYL RELATED EMERGENCY

Always phone 000 (triple zero) for an ambulance and tell the operator that the person has overdosed (the police will usually not come unless the person dies or becomes violent). You should also:

- If the person is unconscious, put them on their side, in the recovery position;
- Stay with the person;
- Try not to panic;
- Check their breathing, clear their airway;

- Do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation if they stop breathing.
- Administer naloxone (Nyxoid®, Prenoxad®) if available and you have been instructed in how to use it. (You can get more information from your doctor or pharmacist.)

**In the event of an overdose it is important that the patch be removed, if still on the skin.**

## OVERDOSE

There is a very real risk of overdose from fentanyl when used other than by your doctor's instructions due to its strength and very fast action once inside the body.

It is **never safe** to inject the contents of a fentanyl patch, but if you do so make sure a friend is always with you. In the case of overdose you will not be able to care for yourself due to the severe effects.

Signs of overdose may include:

- Rapid onset of breathing difficulties, shallow or slow breathing – fentanyl often makes people stop breathing;
- Confusion;
- Fainting;
- Cold and clammy skin and low body temperature;
- Bluish skin and nails because of low oxygen;
- Coma and death.

Fentanyl patches can be very dangerous when heat is applied to it as the heat causes the body to absorb too much medication.

Due to the strength of fentanyl the potential for overdose is high:

- Fentanyl should only be used as prescribed by a doctor;
- Be sure to remove patch after use;

- Increased skin temperature, such as a fever; the use of an electric blanket; or intense exercise, can also increase the risk of overdose.

**Using more patches or for a longer time than prescribed, or injecting fentanyl, is very dangerous because it is not possible to know how much fentanyl is being taken and therefore there is a high risk of overdose.**

### DO NOT:

- Inject the person with any other illicit drug (Ambulance paramedics or medical staff may use naloxone);
- Put them under the shower;
- Put anything in their mouth as it can cause choking and stop them from breathing.

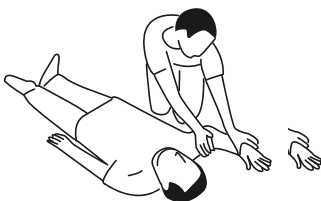
Even if someone fits (has a seizure or convulsion), the best thing to do is move things from around them, so they don't hurt themselves.

To help prevent an overdose:

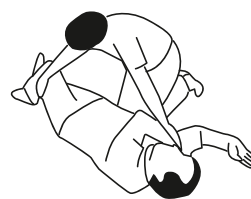
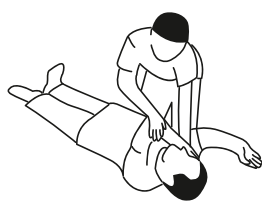
- Only use as prescribed.
- Do not mix with other drugs, fentanyl can be particularly dangerous if used with alcohol, sleeping tablets, antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication (e.g. benzodiazepines) or if already intoxicated.
- Be aware that if you have never used fentanyl before you will have a low tolerance to how it affects you and a higher risk of side effects and overdose including death.

## RECOVERY POSITION

**Figure 1:** Kneel by the person. Raise the arm closest to you and place the arm out at a 90 degree angle to the body.

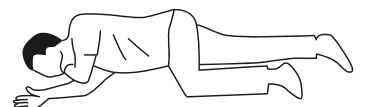


**Figure 2:** Place the other hand under their head against their cheek, to support their head.



**Figure 3:** Lift the leg furthest away from you and place their foot on the floor.

**Figure 4:** Using their knee as a lever gently pull the person onto their side, towards you. Tilt the head back and ensure airway is open and clear.



## MIXING WITH OTHER DRUGS

Never use fentanyl if you have other drugs in your system such as other opioids, alcohol, benzodiazepines, tranquillisers or anti-depressants.

There is an increased risk of overdose death from combining fentanyl with these drugs.

## SAFE STORAGE AND DISPOSAL OF PATCHES

Used fentanyl patches can still contain a large amount of unabsorbed medicine after they are removed, so both new and used patches can be dangerous to children and adults.

Ensure you fold used patches in half with sticky sides together to avoid any unintended contact with the skin.

Wash your hands with soap and water after disposing of the fentanyl patch.

All expired or unwanted medications including used fentanyl patches should be returned to a community pharmacy for safe disposal.

Further information is available at Return Unwanted Medicines (The RUM Project) [www.returnmed.com.au](http://www.returnmed.com.au)

Keep patches far away from children and do not let them see you apply patches or call them stickers, tattoos or band-aids.

## TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

Anyone who uses fentanyl regularly can develop a tolerance. Tolerance means you need to take more of the drug to feel the same effect you used to have with smaller amounts. This could mean that if you use fentanyl regularly you may soon find it difficult to function normally without it.

You may also find it difficult to stop using or control how much you use. Regular users of fentanyl can become dependent very quickly.

Not all people who use fentanyl become dependent and it is important to follow the advice of your medical practitioner.

## PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

Using fentanyl during pregnancy can affect both the woman and the foetus. Injecting non prescribed opioids such as fentanyl can cross the cord and can affect foetal development. This can increase the risk of miscarriage, premature birth and low birth weight. If a woman is opioid dependent, stopping fentanyl and other opioids suddenly is a risk to both the mother and unborn baby.

Effective treatments are available. Talk to your doctor and antenatal staff about prescribed or nonprescribed fentanyl use and attend regular antenatal check-ups. There are specialist services available in NSW as well. [See Information and Advice in this fact sheet] Regular check-ups are important.

Non prescribed opioid use including injecting use of fentanyl during pregnancy carries risks including:

- premature birth or miscarriage, still birth;
- having babies with low birth weight;
- passing infections, such as HIV, hepatitis B or C or blood poisoning, on to the baby;
- having health and social problems during and after pregnancy.

Babies can also have problems after they are born. The baby of a woman prescribed fentanyl during pregnancy, or using non prescribed fentanyl during pregnancy has a risk of a withdrawal following birth. Medication may be necessary. It is important to get help from health staff on how to care for your baby.

Fentanyl passes into breast milk, and can cause further adverse effects on a breast-fed baby. It is generally risky to take any drug while breastfeeding without medical advice.

## WITHDRAWAL

People who are dependent on fentanyl find it very hard to stop using or cut down because of the withdrawal symptoms. These can begin to occur within only a few hours after last use.

Symptoms can include:

- Sweats and chills
- Sleeplessness and broken sleep
- Diarrhoea

- Restless legs
- Stomach and leg cramps
- Nausea
- Runny nose and eyes
- Cravings (wanting Fentanyl very badly)

If you are experiencing problems with withdrawal contact your doctor or health service.

## THE LAW

Using fentanyl without a prescription from a doctor, or keeping, selling or giving fentanyl patches to someone else is illegal. If you are caught you could face fines or even a prison sentence.

Obtaining prescriptions for fentanyl by fraud or by not telling the Doctor about all other prescriptions for fentanyl you obtained in the last 2 months (e.g. Doctor shopping) is also illegal.

## SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

[na.org.au](http://na.org.au) for Narcotics Anonymous Australia, a non-profit fellowship or society of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean via a program of complete abstinence from all drugs.

[www.reconnexion.org.au](http://www.reconnexion.org.au) provides counselling, telephone support and information services (1300 273 266) to address the challenges of anxiety, stress, depression and benzodiazepine (tranquillisers and sleeping pills) dependency and related conditions.

# INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015**.

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

**Your room** provides drug and alcohol information and advice, campaigns and resources. Visit [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)

**Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council** provides links to Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Visit [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au) for information about AHMRC members including a regional map, information and links to members websites.

**Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC)** provides services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Contact DAMEC on **(02) 8113 1301** or for counselling and support services for CALD communities call **(02) 8706 0150**.

**Drug Info** provides facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm. Visit [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

**State Library of New South Wales Drug Info** provides up to date information on alcohol and other drugs in public libraries throughout NSW. Visit [www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au](http://www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au)

**eheadspace** provides mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12-25 years) and their family and friends. Visit [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)

**Family Drug Support** provides 24-7 telephone support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues. Call the Helpline on **1300 368 186** or visit [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

**Kids Helpline** is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Counselling is offered via the Kids Helpline website [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) or email, or call **1800 55 1800**.

**Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS)** works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12 -20 years of age) related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call **(02) 4734 2129** or **(02) 4734 1333**.

**NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)** is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education. Visit [www.nuaa.org.au](http://www.nuaa.org.au)

**Poisons Information Centre** is a 24/7 call centre service available across Australia. Call **13 11 26**

**ReachOut** is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support. Visit [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)

**Sexual Health Info Link** provides free and confidential sexual health support and information. Visit [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au)

**TAFE NSW** provides help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE/ university counsellor. Visit [www.tafensw.edu.au](http://www.tafensw.edu.au)

**Youth Action** is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Visit [www.youthaction.org.au](http://www.youthaction.org.au) and use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.

**Youth Solutions** provides services for young people 12 to 25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and information and referral. Visit [www.youthsolutions.com.au](http://www.youthsolutions.com.au) or call **(02) 4628 2319** [provides services to young people in Macarthur & Wingecarribee].

**NSW Health aims to reduce drug-related harm for individuals and the community by providing the facts, including the possible health, social and economic consequences of using alcohol and other drugs.**

A range of drug and alcohol fact sheets is available for download at: [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)